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Our University - Ideologues and Pragmatists

Walter V. Wendler

In the tension between ideology and pragmatism, that delicate balance, lives the genius of leadership.

Ideologues are often associated with narrow-mindedness and a small view of the world. People who hold strong views related to their faith are often portrayed as ideologues. Likewise, an elected official welded to issues important to him is classified an ideologue. Webster's suggests that an ideologue is an impractical idealist, or a theorist. That not being enough it continues, such people "are often blindly partisan advocates or adherents of a particular ideology."

Even when the ideology might be service, propriety, honesty and sincerity?

A leader blindly committed to being honest? What a breath of fresh air.

Imagine a university professor who is driven to understand the "truth" about relationships between various subatomic particles and gives up all aspects of the search that colors, distorts, or clouds her thinking about such relationships.

I would say that we have a great physicist.

Imagine an elected official who does all she can to serve the people she was elected to serve and is driven toward sincere service in a way that outweighs all else: her own needs take a backseat to the needs of the city, state or nation.

We would give our eyeteeth for such people, we wonder where they are, why we can't find them.

While on the one hand we want an unwavering commitment to ideologies that relate to consistency and fairness, truth and integrity, they often come with strings attached.

Hello pragmatism.

In American philosophy pragmatists like C. S. Peirce and William James pronounced that meaning is found in practical consequences, that function should impact thinking, and what is important should be weighed against observable results. Hard to argue with this.

On the one hand I like this very much, on the other it frightens me.

The committed researcher and the dedicated political leader need not fret over practical consequences. Discoverers and leaders, similar types I hold, are best

served to leave judgment of idea and work to others: at our university, peer reviewers, at city hall, voters and commentators.

Time tells the truth. Always.

Sooner or later the electorate, or the search committee, or the hiring executive, asks, “Is this person the right kind of ideologue?” Does the leader or discoverer have any ideology at all, even a single idea? Are they committed to something other than service of self?

Paul Simon had the uncanny ability to be both an ideologue for values of decency, honesty and fairness, but at the same time wanted to get things done. During the announcement of David Yepsen as the new director of the Paul Simon Institute, I was reminded of Paul’s quip to me one day about having a “do tank” at SIU rather than a “think tank.” Don’t ever believe the Senator was not always thinking about big ideas.

Doing was one of them.

My admiration for him and his way of doing things was never exceeded by my disagreement with him on some issues. He said and did the same things on Michigan Avenue, State Highway 51, on The Hill, and in his office... when it was just the two of us. Consistency, commitment and transparency: always everywhere the same.

Our university, at every level, needs commitment to principles of excellence, integrity, trust and honesty, just as our cities, our states, and our nation. This deep pragmatism may be the most important idea in leadership.

We would trade our eyeteeth for such ideology.